# 14 Suffering as Metaphysical Narrative

## Exploring an Islamic Theodicy of Authorship

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### Introduction

Not long ago I was at the home of relatives who had lost their 23-year-old son to leukemia. While they had their moments of calmness and even joviality, for the most part, as one would expect, they were distraught and inconsolable. Their son was in many ways a pillar of their family, a bodybuilder and an entrepreneur, a person of great charm who had married only months before his sudden diagnosis precipitated quickly. The young man's grandmother was at this gathering. In a room crowded with those who had come to express condolences, the grandmother looked directly at me, during a rare moment of silence. She asked me loudly, so that all could hear, "What can you say to Reza's mother and father to comfort them? You're a professor of religion. Please say something to ease their pain."[1]

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I had nothing to say. There was no response that I could give them that did not feel either forced or somehow emotionally manipulative, as though I wanted to coax them out of a grief that was more than warranted. At moments like these, I never know what to say. I usually stand or sit silently and do my best to mutter something about my sympathies, while feeling inside a dual sense of respect and empathy, tinged with feelings of guilt and gratitude that I am not in their place.

Here, though, in this chapter, I would like to give those parents the best response I can. What follows is not so much a philosophical argument, as it is a reframing—a shift in perspective that has helped me in such times. In other words, I offer nothing more than my own humble means of perseverance. It begins with the conviction that life has some meaning to it. Moreover, human life specifically results from acts of creation. I do not mean in any way to disavow scientific claims about the universe or the evolution of species, theories with which I am perfectly comfortable, even as they remain unrelated to the topic at hand. Rather, I want to call on a sense of intuition that I have and share with others: a conviction that there is

1 Incidentally, the suffering and death of innocents—including a case of leukemia—is the topic of Stanley Hauerwas, *Naming the Silences: God, Medicine, and the Problem of Suffering* (New York: T&T Clark International, 1990).

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some purpose behind my life and the lives of those around me. In fact, I will go beyond merely a sense of purpose and say that, if viewed as part of a composition or an act of authorship, my life has an author. Informing my view of human life as authored are the ethical and literary perspectives of two great thinkers, one classical, the other more contemporary; the first is the 13th-century Spanish Sufi theorist, Ibn ʿArabī (d. 1240), and the second is 20th-century Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin (d. 1975).

From Ibn ʿArabī, I draw the idea that creation exists for me as a rich and multi-layered experience of imagination. There is, first, my own imagination that allows me to perceive things and know things in a human way, constructed using my own sensory input, the sensory input that I have received from my infancy until today. My sense of imagination has constructed a world that makes sense to me. Yet it is no fantasy. The world that makes sense to me is a world of forms that communicate supersensory meanings. Beyond all of this, beyond my own perception and my own imagination, lies what you might call the imagination of God. Everything I know and see is maintained by this transcendent knower of everything. Were God to divert His attention from anything, including myself, for even an instant, I would cease to be. In this way, God is a constant author and viewer of my reality.

I call on Bakhtin because I live in a modernity that has given me arguably contemporary literature's greatest gift to human cultures, namely, the novel. The novel has *changed* the way we perceive our world. Relatedly, the novel has also *resulted* from changes in the language that we use to understand the world. For Bakhtin, the novel comes to be in a setting wherein the rigidity of language, language as supported by power structures, begins to break down, succumbing to diverse voices, genres, worldviews, and dialects, a breakdown in the world outside the novel reflected within the novel.[2] One might think of the epic poem, structured both as verse and as a single authorial voice, as contrasting with the novel. This shift in literature describes, quite well, the transition that many communities made from feudal agrarian life to that centered around the city, or what we might call the onset of modernity. This is a shift in emphasis, with emphasis placed on the inwardness of the self. One should not mistakenly assume, however, that such inwardness is a uniquely modern experience.[3]

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2 See Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist and trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 371. What distinguishes Bakhtin's approach to the narrated self—in comparison with MacIntyre's "narrative unity of a life" and Ricœur's "emplotment"—is his insistence on the essential and dialogical relationship between the I-for-myself and the I-for-the-other. See Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan, "The I That Tells Itself: A Bakhtinian Perspective on Narrative Identity," *Narrative* 16, no. 1 (2008): 3–4.

3 As Muhammad Faruque has shown in his response to Charles Taylor, inwardness is neither "modern" nor "Western." Rather, conceptions of inwardness that emphasize creativity and the infinite potential of the self can be found in classical Sufi and Islamic philosophical writings. See Faruque, "Charles Taylor and the Invention of Modern Inwardness: A Sufi, Constructive Response," *Religions* 13, no. 674 (2022): 17–18.

**Bakhtin and the Authorship of Life**

For Bakhtin, the novel presents a pluralism of all perspectives contained in it. Each voice in the novel brings its own orientation and even philosophy. There is an author, of course, in the novel, but the author exists only as a careful curator of various perspectives, so much so that he or she has all but disappeared in many novels, or at least those that have the quality that Bakhtin called "heteroglossia."[4] In its fullest effect, heteroglossia leads to dialogism, which is a modality of knowledge in which the convergence of multiple dialogues creates meaning. Bakhtin reflects on the novel, on literature, and the relationship between author and hero in ways that are sometimes surprisingly relevant to readers of Ibn ʿArabī. For example, he tells us about the relationship in classical literature between fate and the hero. Classical literature, such as that of the Greeks, as well as Persian heroic poetry, presents us with a hero who should feel doomed. It accomplishes that by giving us an author who avoids offering any moral frame of reference or perspective.[5]

Imagining an author other than the self for one's life has a twofold quality that becomes clear through Bakhtin's literary theory. First, it creates a sense of predetermined fate, or doom. Yet, second, it also liberates the hero from being the author. Thus, the author's determination of the course of the hero's life bestows upon the hero both meaning and beauty:

> A determined life, a life freed from the claws of what-is-yet-to-be, of the future, of purpose and meaning—such a life becomes emotionally measurable, musically expressive, and self-sufficient (sufficient to itself as totally present-on-hand); its being already determined becomes a valuable determinateness. Meaning is not born, nor does it die; the meaning-governed sequence or progression of one's life, that is, the cognitive-ethical tension of a lived life from within itself, can be neither started nor consummated. Death cannot be the consummation of this meaning-governed progression.[6]

By freeing the hero from having to create his or her own meaning, the author has located a superseding sense of meaning beyond the hero's particular frame of reference: the hero exists within a context of meaning, and that meaning neither comes to be with the hero nor dies with the death of the hero. The hero's narrative becomes an opportunity to witness the lasting beauty of a transitory window into meaning, one window among many. This sense of an author other than oneself for the role one plays in the story of life, I am arguing, can liberate us from having to be the authors of our own individual stories. Suffering, too, then becomes framed within a larger context of meaning that contains each of us.

4 Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 400.

5 Mikhail M. Bakhtin, "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity," in *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist and Vadim Liapunov and trans. Vadim Liapunov (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1990), 176–177.

6 Bakhtin, "Author and Hero," 108.

For Bakhtin, the soul is the self in dialogue. The soul is that part of the self that comes to be within the context of its interactions and experiences among others. The spirit, on the other hand, is the culmination of meanings acquired in that dialogue with others—acquired in life, one might say:

> I experience the inner life of another as his soul; within myself, I live in the spirit. The soul is an image of the totality of everything that has been actually experienced—of everything that is present-on-hand in the soul in the dimension of time; the spirit is the totality of everything that has the validity of meaning—a totality of all the forms of my life's directedness from within itself, of all my acts of proceeding from within myself.[7]

The spirit is far beyond anything that can be described in story, because, for Bakhtin, the spirit remains constantly receptive. It does not give back. The author—for Bakhtin—creates representationally that soul-spirit dynamic in the novel by giving the characters souls, which then lends the novel itself a spirit. The author, in other words, recreates in the novel the world that we all know as life, the life in which we interact with others.

Thinking about Bakhtin's theory, I can begin to see my own life and the events within it not as centered around me, but as part of a larger story that contains me. My story is not really a story at all: it is a role in which I interact with others, creating one dialogue, one conversation among multiple conversations that form the story of our collective novel, the story of reality. This story has an author whom one would call "God." Importantly, I am not that story's hero, because it is not my story; it is, instead, the story of humanity. Thinking about Ibn ʿArabī's description of the Quran, we might say that while I am a soul within that story, the spirit of that story is the Quran. Ibn ʿArabī tells us that the Quran "unveils all the knowledges sent down in the scriptures and contains that which is not contained by them" because "Muhammad was given the 'all-comprehensive words' (*jawāmiʿ al-kalim*)," which means that "the sciences of the prophets, the angels, and every known tongue are comprised" in the Quran.[8] That is, the meaningful dimension of our existence has been summarized in the Quran, and the Quran itself declares that it contains "the most beautiful of stories" (Q 12:3).

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### Malaise of the Self-Authored Story

Placing one's life within the context of a story often means something different from what I have described. Usually, in modern contexts, we are encouraged to focus on our own unique story—with oneself as author. This, however, seems to create more discontent and disappointment, when life presents a person with events

7 Bakhtin, "Author and Hero," 110.

8 William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-ʿArabī's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), 239.

and circumstances that do not fit the narratives we think we choose or create. So argues the American theologian Stanley Hauerwas. Hauerwas is interested in the way that Americans, particularly those who live within a framework of what might be called "modernity," see themselves as the author of their own story. The extent to which I might choose my occupation, select a mate, time the births of my children, and generally determine my own identity—all this is indicative of a modern and American outlook to Hauerwas:

> America exemplifies what I call the project of modernity—the attempt to produce a people who believe that they should have no story except the story that they chose when they had no story. That is what Americans mean by freedom. The institutions that constitute the disciplinary forms of that project are liberal democracy and capitalism. Americans presume that they have exercised their freedom when they get to choose between a Sony or Panasonic television. The same presumption works for choosing a president, and once you have made your choice you have to learn to live with it. So, freedom requires a kind of resignation. . . . It is assumed that you should only be held accountable when you acted *freely*. And to act freely, you had to know what you were doing. One of the difficulties with such an account of responsibility, for example, is that it makes marriage unintelligible.[9]

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The problem, he argues, derives from the fact that those ways of defining myself—those ways of writing my own story—almost always lead to disappointment. The person I married 20 years ago will not be the same person I am married to today. Therefore, I can never say that I chose to be married to this person. Moreover, the children that I have will invariably grow up to be individuals entirely outside of my domain of influence. I cannot choose my children, for, in terms of their identities, they just happen to intersect with in my life. This way of thinking of my story as my own story—and me as the author of my own story—leads to frustrations as well as futile attempt after futile attempt to reassert myself, trying to rewrite things, revise matters so that I might be that author I imagine. At best, I fool myself into thinking that I am the author of my own story as well as its hero. At worst, I suffer a crisis of identity, one that brings me to reject any meaningful theory of life. When that story, the story of the self that is both modern and American, does happen to work out, I see my successes as part of my story. I sense that I have earned those successes. Conversely, I begin to see all trials as matters that I should rightly be able to control. A person might say for example, upon getting sick, that I must rise to the occasion to be at war with my sickness. In reality, there is often very little that I can do to predict my own longevity, other than staying in the best health that I can.

9 Stanley Hauerwas, *War and the American Difference: Theological Reflections on Violence and National Identity* (Grand Rapids: BakerAcademic, 2011), 17.

**The Quranic Grand Narrative: Another Author's Story**

Once I begin to see the author of my story as someone else, and once I begin to see myself not as the hero, but as one voice or one soul within that story, my perspective shifts considerably. I would argue that this difference in perspective appears in the Quran as well. Take the case of Abraham. When Abraham wants to describe God, he describes Him in terms of the interventions God has made within his life:

> "The One who created me, then He guided me; and the One who fed me and gave me drink; the One who, when I was sick, healed me; the one who will bring me death, then return me to life; and the One whom I hope will forgive me of my faults on the Day of the Criterion." (Q 26:78–82)[10]

The way that Abraham knows God is through these major events that he shares with other people. His knowledge of God is as an author, or as a causal factor, in the important times of his life, as well as the more quotidian parts of his life. Recognizing God's activity orients him towards God, but I would add—at least for the purposes of this chapter—that it orients him away from concern for his own ability to act. Such a perspective orients Abraham away from blaming himself for what he cannot control and from taking credit for what he did not control. Instead, he maintains hope in what is completely beyond any human being's control. He begins to see his life as one life among many, a life that makes sense. This yields gratitude as well as a sort of trusting resignation. When he was sick, it was up to God to heal him. If God had decided not to heal him, then he would have remained sick or, worse, perished. Had either of those things happened, not only would Abraham have been affected, but all of those who loved him would be affected as well. Within this scriptural context, those who love him include generations of saintly men and women. It includes both the Children of Israel and the tribes of the Arabs. It includes all monotheists within the Western religions, in fact, because his role in this larger story is that of a grand soul. The dialogue that he has had with others, the voice that he shared with those around him, was a major theme in the novel of existence.

Another case in the Quran of particular significance is that of a dialogue between God and Moses. When Moses comes before God, he fears appearing alone at the court of the Pharaoh. He asks God to make his brother, Aaron, his partner in this act of prophetic bravery. God grants his request, but then reminds Moses of the favors He has done for him throughout his life:

> He said, "We have granted your request, O Moses! And We favored you another time before, when We revealed to your mother what We revealed: 'Put him in the chest and the chest on the open water, so that the water will

10 All translations are my own, unless otherwise indicated.

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> bring him to the bank. An enemy to Me and to him will take him.' And I bequeathed a love upon you from Myself so that you would be brought up before My eyes. Recall when your sister was walking, so she said, 'Shall I lead you to one who can care for him?' So, We returned you to your mother, to bring tranquility to her eyes and so she would not grieve. And you killed a person, and so We rescued you from sorrow and tested you in many ways. Thus you passed years among the people of Midian. Then you came to Me at the arranged time, O Moses!" (Q 20:36–40)

Fascinating here is that the events in Moses's life become reframed, each as acts of grace, and the entirety of his life becomes described as God's abiding presence. At every turn, God was there, making sure things went the way they were supposed to go. Moreover, that story is not entirely about Moses—just as Moses's life is not entirely about Moses. The passage also concerns his mother and his sister. It is also about his enemies and his friends. Each of them has some effect upon the other, and each of their lives is changed because of Moses. Again, as with Abraham, we have another major voice in this grand story. Moses, like Abraham, recognizes God's role in his life. We know this because he asks God to change the story, supplicating for God to alter things, which is within the realm of possibility for God and only God. While we remain powerless to change our role, we can direct our attention to its author, asking Him to alter it. The story, after all, is being written, even if it has also been written before. Within that larger story of existence, Moses is a powerful example of someone who is heroic, but even he cannot be called the hero of the story.

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We might say, moreover, that the narrative we are a part of is a narrative beyond what we can understand. Because it lies beyond what we can understand, it becomes difficult for us to locate benevolence at all times. We cannot see the story in its entirety, for we can only see our own role in it. Even then, we stand imperceptive to the story's conclusion because we do not know what happens after death to us. This sense of resignation within the context of a grand story appears in the Quran. When one looks for it, one finds it everywhere in that text. For example, those who face calamity according to the Quran are instructed to declare, "Indeed we belong to God, and to Him we return" (Q 2:156). One might say, for our purposes here, "Indeed, we are from God, and to Him we return." This is the barest structure of the grand story. Notice, first of all, the use of the first-person plural. It is not, "I am from God, and to Him I return." Rather, we, humanity, who are from God, return. While we might return upon our deaths at different times and then after death again together, the point is that humanity comes from God and goes to God; it implies that everything in between those two points is unknown to us. Our comfort lies in knowing how the narrative began and how the narrative ends. Our solace is in knowing that there is a narrative and that the narrative is beyond our control. That the author is, as described in the Quran, merciful and loving.

The perspective prescribed to the Quran's followers is one of indefatigable hope. This is because the superseding narrative—containing each believer's

role—has been established as a meaningful and even beautiful one. So declared the Prophet Muhammad in a well-known narration, "How wondrous is the affair of the believer! The believer's affair is entirely good, and this is something that applies to no one but the believer." The belief of the believer yields an "affair" (*al-amr*), or, one might say a role in life's narrative, that is good (*khayr*) regardless of the particular circumstances of that life. Knowing this, "When stricken by prosperity, the believer is grateful. When stricken by hardship, the believer is steadfast. This is good for the believer."[11] Many believers die in abject poverty, after decades of strife or ill health. Some of those who embrace this narrative, those who are "believers" in it, suffer constantly, at least externally—even if in some cases their cores remain unshaken. Their belief lies in an understanding of the goodness of their affair; that is, they know the outline of the larger beautiful story.

On one hand, the Quran and Hadith promise a recompense for such suffering, as another narration clarifies:

> God the Almighty will apologize to His servants who were needy in this world just as a brother apologizes to his brother, and say, "I swear by My Honor that I did not make you poor to humiliate you. Now push the curtain aside and see what I have given you instead." When the curtain is pushed aside and he sees what God has rewarded him with instead of this world, he says, "Oh God! There was no harm for me due to what You took away from me (in this world) considering what you have given me instead (now in the Hereafter)."[12]

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This is the prevailing sentiment in Islamic scriptures regarding human suffering. Nevertheless, we might read such narrations slightly differently than the surface reading—this time focusing less on recompense than on a sense of belonging. The grand narrative contains all of us, and our experience of prosperity or hardship reflects only our place within that narrative. If at any particular moment the author of that story does not seem benevolent, we have been guaranteed that at the end, He will.

### What About Human Will?

To relegate life's authorship to another raises a question, an age-old inquiry common to monotheistic religions. Who is ultimately responsible for human actions and the course of human life? This is a theological matter well outside what literary theory can tell us—and well beyond the boundaries of this chapter. Nevertheless, the question itself creates an opportunity to consider the narrative dimensions

11 Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ* (Riyadh: Dār al-Mughnī, 1998), 1598 (no. 2999).

12 al-Ḥasan b. Faḍl al-Ṭabarsī, *The Lamp Niche for the Best Traditions*, trans. Lisa Zaynab Morgan and Ali Peiravi (Qum: Ansariyan, 2002), 712 (no. 1697). Translation modified here, using the original Arabic text provided in the volume.

of "the Decree" (*al-qaḍāʾ*) and "the Apportionment" (*al-qadar*). Here, again, Ibn ʿArabī's system of philosophical Sufi theory illuminates the discussion—through the lens of a later interpreter. The Twelver Shiʿi Quran commentator, Hadith scholar, and philosopher Mullā Fayḍ al-Kāshānī (d. 1679) places the relationship between God's decree and human autonomy within the terminological framework of Ibn ʿArabī's language:

**On the Decree and the Apportionment**

"As for each thing, We have created it by apportionment"

(Q 54:49).

This chapter is a word concerning the meaning of the Decree and the Apportionment, and the secret behind the Apportionment.

The Decree is an expression for the divine ruling upon the existent entities, according to the passing states they occupy from eternity-without-beginning to eternity-without-end. The Apportionment is the elaboration of that ruling by bringing [the states] into existence in their appropriate moments and times, as determined by the occurrence of the things in it, as per their particular preparedness. Thus "Apportionment" can be explained as the phenomenon in which every state from the entities' states becomes attached to a designated time and designated cause.

The secret of the Apportionment is that it is not possible for an entity from among the created entities to make manifest in existence an essence, attribute, or action but by the apportioning that corresponds to the particularity of its capability and essential preparedness, which does not accept alteration, substitution, addition, or subtraction.

This is because created things are known to God, the Exalted. He is the one who knows them as they are in themselves. Knowledge leaves no trace in the known that there might appear something that was not already there within the known. Rather knowledge is subject to the known, and any ruling that pertains to the known is subject to the known.

Thus the knower has no ruling for the known but in accordance with the known and what the known's essence determines in accordance with its preparedness, both universal and particular.[13]

The two terms "decree" and "apportionment" correspond to a phrase used to describe God's determination of the course of creation, as debated by theologians. The prevailing Sunni opinions—as expressed by the Ashʿarī, Māturīdī, and Ahl al-Ḥadīth approaches—favored the prerogative of God's will. This contrasted with

13 Fayḍ al-Kāshānī, *Qurrat al-ʿuyūn fī aʿazz al-funūn*, ed. Ḥasan al-Qāsimī (Tehran: Madrasa-yi ʿĀlī-yi Shahīd Muṭahharī, 2008), 76–77.

a longer-standing theological school, the Muʿtazila, who favored the prerogative of human choice, which they saw as necessary to maintain God's justice. That is, one side (the prevailing Sunni opinion) argued that whatever God willed was just. God's will is just by nature and hence defines justice in a way that we humans need not necessarily be able to discern. The other side (the Muʿtazila) argued that God and His will could be expected to abide by a discernable standard of justice.

Fayḍ, the writer of the passage, belonged to the Imāmī school of theology, which borrowed heavily from the Muʿtazila, while also endeavoring to find a middle ground between the prerogative of God's will and that of human choice. Some of that attempt at balancing God's will and human choice can be seen in the passage. More directly, however, he analyzes the issue not as an Imāmī, but rather as a spiritually informed philosopher. It is this that pertains to our discussion.

Put in simplest terms, Fayḍ explains how our will, the story of our decisions, might be contained within God's will, the story of creation. This is because every existing "thing" corresponds to a series of states of being—the states of being that each thing will occupy for all of eternity. God knows these eternally, even before gifting that thing with existence. Based on all the states that each thing will experience, God places each of those states within its appropriate place, a place that suits the well-being of that thing, or, in our case, the well-being of each person. Metaphorically speaking, each note in the symphony of one's existence must be struck at the appropriate time: God has arranged them appropriately. That placement is no accident. It defines each of us, configuring us as an individual composition.

More interestingly, God does not determine the states of our existence based on anything outside of ourselves. Our unique existence dictates all of those states. God knows that existence and all of those states. He knows us, and we are thus known by Him, and Fayḍ reminds us that a knower's knowledge does not shape the known. Quite to the contrary, every known thing determines what the knower knows. This means that we, as compositions, are not written at the whim of a composer. Instead, we come to fruition in a way that the composer knows to be perfect for each of us. The parameters of our being dictate the composition of our existence. The parameters of our being dictate the manner, placement, and timing of states (or events) in our life.

In terms of authorship, the metaphor of the "character" might help clarify this. The author is certainly free to determine whatever He wishes for the character, but any author will tell you that the character determines her own story. Her arc must suit her traits. Her decisions, victories, and mistakes come from a self-contained logic that inheres in the character. Yet the author created the character. The author's imagination gave birth to the particular blend of attributes that is this unique character. The author, also, brings the character's progress and end to realization and completion based on the origins of the character—origins that He created.

Lastly, every character is an extension of the author. The author's knowledge of each character is absolute because the characters are extensions of the author's knowledge, indeed, extensions of the author Himself. The author brings His character into words—into realized existence—from the hidden depths of His own knowledge, which determines all the states and events pertaining to that character.

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The hack writer forces his vision and voice on each character. The master novelist disappears into the background, so that each character exists in seeming independence, seeming independence of voice and action. The reality is that the character both is and is not independent. By nature of her being, she makes decisions and reacts to the events in her life. But by nature of her being an extension of the author and the author's knowledge, those decisions and reactions always remain contained within the plan that would allow that character to come to be and would complete that character's arc.

**Conclusion**

This metaphor of author and divine creator, of course, has its limitations. Among other things, what makes God unlike other authors is the perfection and universality of His knowledge, the detail, breadth, and infinity of the composition. Here we speak not of the controlled setting of the novel—even the most expansive novels. Rather, there are infinite possibilities for an almost infinite number of entities. At times, this complexity might bring us to wonder whether or not there is a plan or composition at all. Isolation, deprivation, or things in disorder bring us to see strings of events with no meaningful ties between them. Thus, the sense of an authored narrative escapes us most in moments of deep suffering, when states of being seem to have no design or relationship to one another. (Famously, the Great Lisbon Earthquake of 1755 was a turning point in Enlightenment thought, because it seemed to undermine existing theodicies.)

Another habit of thinking can keep me from seeing the "grand story" in which I play a small role: my imagined sense of my life being "my story," in which I play the starring role. My importance and centrality contradict the pains of my life—especially when they do not fit with the logic of the story of selfhood I had been constructing for myself. It is either my story or no story—or stories become modified and changed, highlighting these stories as products of whim, rather than expressions of meaning.

Conversely, the sense of an authored narrative grips us most when we can see the interconnectedness between us and others, when our individual character arcs and unique contributions to the universal story interact. When we need each other, love each other, and know each other through-and-through, it is as if everything falls into place. We then see interconnectedness in dialogue with one another. Our lives become more like roles suited to us than disparate and often desperate attempts to attain our own unique forms of happiness.

Practically speaking, we might think of ways to limit our roles and focus on the "other" author: keeping me from overemphasizing the importance of my own personal narrative might mean thinking more clearly about how I live with others, emphasizing controlled interactions with people whose narratives I know. Conjecturing on what this might mean, perhaps smaller, more closely knit communities mitigate the larger sense of meaningless and disconnectedness

which we associate with individual instances of suffering. By this I mean communities in which people serve one another, care for one another, and—importantly—know quite a bit about one another. Belonging to a community in which I know my purpose might yield a sense of a narrative beyond my control in which I have a place.

In fact, to some extent, this imagined community corresponds to traditional life, a life contrary to the trend of living in isolation, especially in urban settings, a life facilitated by virtual interactions that have replaced natural multi-dimensional interactions. Here again, while all this is only fodder for future reflection, one might argue that virtual engagement strips me of realizing the limits of my embodiment and displaying the uniqueness of my being in the world. Online, these become replaced by an idealized, synthetic, self-constructed (or at least self-curated) persona, one who interacts with a world that can never know the real, lived, three-dimensional, living me. Through all this, any sense of a grander, real-life story disappears behind a plastic suit of isolation, a façade (or rather multiple layers of façade) that does its best to represent me, but it must do so in ways that can be transmitted in digital code.

With this in mind, let me return to my relatives who lost their son in the prime of his life. Their role in this grand narrative continues, as on some level does their son's. My role has intersected with theirs at this very moment. We can together find solace in the fact that we share this narrative, because the narrative has brought us together. It has bound us by love, a love we would not have known without the history and family ties that made it possible, namely, the intersecting roles we have. This certainly might not serve as any consolation, nor does it seem to function as a full-fledged response to the problem of suffering. At the very least, however, it reminds us that our suffering exists within the context of meaning and purpose. It places our lives within a framework of meaning that towers above us and outlives us. Finally, it brings our intersecting, dialogical roles together, relegating the encumbrance of answerability to another author, an author other than ourselves.

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